

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUL #0485/01 0840800
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 250800Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3773
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5510
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 9405
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5605
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 3090
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA
RUACAAA/COMUSKOREA INTEL SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//OSD/ISA/EAP//

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000485

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2019
TAGS: [KS](#) [KN](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: SOUTH KOREANS CALM ABOUT NORTH KOREAN THREATS

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: The South Korean public has reacted calmly to North Korea's increasingly hostile rhetoric and actions over the last six months. Even in the shadow of the North's impending missile launch, polls show only a slight up tick in public concern about the North Korean threat, and debate in the National Assembly has predictably split along party lines, with the progressives calling for improving inter-Korean relations and the conservatives focused on punitive responses to a launch. The recent restrictions on access to the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which stranded South Korean nationals in the North, and North Korea's arrest of two American journalists have received much media coverage, but we do not sense any increase of public unease. Support for President Lee Myung-bak's insistence on a reciprocal relationship with the North remains firm; however, at the same time the majority of Koreans also want to see improved inter-Korean relations. This dichotomy makes Lee vulnerable to public criticism if a major incident, such as a West Sea clash over the disputed maritime boundary, were to take place. End Summary.

Public Sanguine but Alert

2. (C) The South Korean public has been and remains surprisingly calm about North Korean provocations. Professor Lee Sang-don of Chung-Ang University commented that the South Korean people are strangely optimistic about North Korean intentions. He noted that young people who have no memory of the Korean War are particularly unconcerned. Recent polling bears this out; a March 5 Korea Society Opinion Institute (KSOI) survey found that 49.3 percent of respondents did not feel nervous about North Korean threats, while 48.3 percent said they were. The percentage of those concerned was only slightly up from previous years -- 40.2 percent in 2005 and 42.9 percent in 2006. The poll found that women and people in their 50's were more likely to be concerned about the North's provocations.

Politicians Concerned

3. (C) Politicians have reacted predictably with debate split along party lines. Many in the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) have called for South Korea to join the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), while some in the

opposition Democratic Party (DP) have advocated the resumption of humanitarian aid to improve relations with the North. At a Foreign Affairs, Trade and Unification (FATU) Committee meeting on March 12, GNP lawmakers harshly criticized the North for violating the inter-Korean agreement on security at KIC. Conservative lawmakers noted that the KIC restrictions showed that the North was willing to take hostages. Separately, GNP Representative Gu Sang-chan told poloffs that KIC's closure was illegal and, in response, the U.S. and ROK should take a harder line. When North Korea violated its agreements, he said, we should impose stricter sanctions. At the same time, Gu said, if the DPRK worked toward denuclearization, the U.S. and ROK should be ready to offer significant aid and incentives.

14. (C) DP lawmakers, however, in the March 12 FATU Committee meeting called for resuming humanitarian assistance to the North to improve inter-Korean relations. DP Representative Park Jie-won told poloffs that he had given many press interviews in order to convey former President Kim Dae-jung's messages: one to the DPRK that Pyongyang should not launch a missile and one to the Lee Administration that it should ease its policy toward the North. Park conceded, however, that the ROKG was unlikely to change its stance, so the U.S. would have to convince Seoul to embrace a "grand bargain" the way President Clinton had convinced President Kim Young-sam.

Hard Line Policy Could Backfire

15. (C) Public support is largely in favor of improving inter-Korean relations. In a Hangil Research poll on March 13-14, 67.7 percent of respondents said that President Lee should make an effort to restart dialogue with the North. A KSOI poll on February 25 targeting government officials found that 69.7 percent favored outreach to the North. The public, however, still does not blame the South Korean government for deteriorating ties. According to a March 17 survey, 72.2 percent of respondents said the North was directly responsible for freezing inter-Korean cooperation at KIC.

16. (C) There is potential, however, that the blame could shift to the President. According to a poll by an independent polling company, more than 80 percent of South Koreans believed that continued military threats from North Korea will have a negative effect on South Korea's economy. In a climate where economic difficulties are foremost in people's minds, Lee could ultimately be blamed for allowing inter-Korean ties to sour to the point that South Korea's economy is impacted.

Comment

17. (C) For the most part, the Korean public is confident that North Korea is not a threat. They are more confident still that North Korea will not attempt anything "physical." GNP National Assembly contacts agreed, noting in early March that, despite the recent increases in tension on the Peninsula, they did not expect any change in public opinion toward the DPRK or any demand for a changed North Korea policy. This relative nonchalance among the South Koreans requires some North Korean cooperation; there must not be an incident involving the militaries, especially no loss of lives. If their assumption does not hold, President Lee will be at the receiving end of mounting public criticism, which could quickly threaten his North Korea policy.
STEPHENS